

## What Is Spirituality – A Guide To Spiritual Disciplines And Development

For the past 15 years I have been exposed to several wisdom traditions, seeking to understand the essence of their philosophy, the practice and methods involved, and the goal. I've looked into Zen, Theravada Buddhism, Occultism, Taoism, New Age, Yoga, Vedanta, etc.

These traditions share many common practices, principles, and goals – and yet there are profound differences in approaches, beliefs, and worldviews. This post is my effort of putting it all together, and presenting an overview of the common goals and practice of different spiritual paths.

You don't need to follow an institutionalised religion in order to have a fruitful spiritual life. **Spiritual but not religious** is a way too. This doesn't imply, however, that you reject tradition.

Tradition is there to serve you, and it would be silly to throw away the collective development of mystics over millennia and try to reinvent the wheel. Find a wisdom tradition that speaks to your heart, then study and practice the core of it. Just don't outsource your spiritual journey – own it, explore with your own feet, experiment with the teachings, and trust your own discernment.

My goal with this post is to present an overview of the spiritual landscape – something you can use to understand and classify the different practices/paths, and find the path most suitable for you. I don't pretend to know all the answers; rather, I'm openly sharing some reflections and insights gained along the way. I hope you take something out of this!

# The Drive for Spirituality

Why do you need spirituality? What is the point?

Just like meditation is different things for different people, so it is with spirituality. I know what spirituality means to me, but I wanted to have a broader view on the spectrum of different perspectives on this. So, in July this year, I asked my readers:

*What is spirituality for you, and why is it important?*

And got hundreds of different responses. Looking at the common themes in the answers, I can say that people interested in following a spiritual path are looking for one or more of the following eight things. [*These are ordered according to the number of answers I received for each.*]

**PURPOSE / DIRECTION.** Whether you are on the top of the wheel of material life or on the bottom, there is an underlying sense of dissatisfaction, limitation, and emptiness. Some people are sensitive to this, others aren't, or they try to fill this up by chasing external goals endlessly. Spirituality is a search for meaning, for purpose and direction in life. It fulfills our need to have a foundation for living, a path or way of life in the light of a larger context. It speaks to the need to be "aligned" with something bigger than our body and mind.

**ONENESS / LOVE / CONNECTION.** This speaks to our sense of *separation* and incompleteness. Because it is painful, we seek connection and love – either in a community, or in being one with the universe, or connecting with the Divine (whatever shape this may take). To feel complete, we crave to receive and give unconditional love, which brings a sense of total acceptance and of happiness in being alive. This search can also manifest as returning to the source, to God, or to a sense of sacredness.

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**GROWTH.** There is an innate drive in many of us to evolve, to improve, to push the boundaries, reach our full potential. The drive to continuously grow and learn, live a life authentic to our truth, develop our mind, cultivate virtues, and expand our consciousness.

**ANSWERS / TRUTH.** Questions like "Who am I?", "Why are we here?", and "What else is there?" together with a drive to understand how life works and to learn about ourselves. For some this takes the form of understanding, absorbing, and becoming one with the absolute Truth.

**HAPPINESS / PEACE / OVERCOME SUFFERING.** Suffering is the initial door of spirituality for many people. When our mind depends on external things for happiness,

its experience of happiness will be inconstant, unreliable, impermanent – just like external causes are. It has been rightly coined as “stock market happiness”. Since suffering is a mental phenomenon, and spiritual practices are a means to transform one’s mind, it is a wise way of seeking a better life. Hence, there is the drive to seek happiness and peace *internally*. Or to at least to diminish the suffering that we are experiencing. Spirituality helps us gain balance, independence from external cases, and a greater appreciation of life.

**TRANSCENDENCE / ENLIGHTENMENT.** Different traditions describe enlightenment differently. But the common theme is that it is a state of transcendence from the human condition, beyond all possibility of further suffering. There is a radical and permanent shift in our perception and experience of the world, and a moving beyond the sense of being an individual, or a person. It’s the urge to experience ultimate peace or freedom, to find the ultimate reality of who we are, transcend the ego, or “merge with God”.

**EXPLORATION / MYSTERY.** Diving into one’s own consciousness and exploring other aspects of reality is something that speaks to our thirst for knowledge, experience, and adventure. Learning the mysteries of life and nature, exploring the sacred, and living with a sense of wonder.

**SERVING.** The urge to serve people in a deeper level, making a big difference in their life, and helping the upliftment of humanity.

So these are the possible reasons for exploring spirituality. Having a greater clarity on what is the drive behind your search can be helpful when choosing which path or practices to take.

Some of these things may not speak to you at all, while you feel a great attraction for others. It’s all good – that is why there are different paths out there, to match seekers of different temperaments, stages of development, values, and goals. For me, personally, the pull was always truth, transcendence, enlightenment; though I can see I got benefits in all the other areas as well.

In a way, all these drives have one thing in common: they show we are not satisfied with only the material side of life, and we wish to move beyond this limitation.

# The Goals of Spirituality



The goal is defined differently in each path. Here are just a few examples:

- **Buddhism:** achieve the cessation of suffering (enlightenment, *nirvana*); see reality for what it is; uproot the mental defilements.
- **Yoga:** purify the mind so to achieve liberation (*moksha*); uniting the individual soul with the universal Soul; becoming one with the Absolute Consciousness; be the true Self.
- **Vedanta:** realise the true Self; dissolve the knot of the ego, which limits pure Consciousness to a body-mind.
- **Sufism:** experience divine revelation; surrender to God; serve God.
- **Christian Mysticism:** experience union with God; the kingdom of heaven; feel the love of the creator.
- **Daoism/Taoism:** live in harmony with the Dao; cultivate body, mind, and spirit; cultivating and sublimating energy.
- **Kabbalah:** learn the ultimate laws of the universe; know the creator and oneself, and live accordingly.
- **Jainism:** liberation; salvation; karmic purification; become a perfected-being (*Siddha*).
- **Shamanism:** live in harmony and connection with Nature; develop knowledge and power to work with invisible forces; serve the spiritual welfare of the community; heal the soul.

Regardless of how the goal is framed, and the philosophy behind it, wisdom traditions ultimately offer us techniques for personal transformation, for moving beyond our personal shell. This can be for the sake of growth, service, transcendence, overcoming suffering, union with a higher principle, internal freedom, happiness, etc.

## Spiritual Disciplines

Every spiritual practice should serve a definite purpose, according to what drives us to spirituality, and the goal we are seeking. I call this approach *pragmatic spirituality*. It's not about continuing a tradition, or doing something because "we feel we should", but to actively explore our inner world, driven by a specific question, thirst, or goal.

In the beginning you may not know exactly what this pull is. That's ok – it's enough that it is authentic.

Here is an overview of the different types of spiritual practice, across multiple traditions. They seem to fall into three categories:

- (a) practices of personal cultivation, sublimation, and exploration.
- (b) practices of learning, understanding, absorbing.
- (c) practices of external action.

### *CULTIVATION & SUBLIMATION*

**Meditation.** It's an exercise of controlling your attention. The three main general [types of meditation](#) are: *focused attention* (concentrating your mind on a single point); *open monitoring* (being aware of whatever is in your experience in the present moment); *pure awareness* (resting the attention on consciousness, undistracted and unengaged). Meditation is specially emphasised in the spiritual traditions that originated from India (Buddhism, Vedanta, Yoga, Tantra, Jainism, etc.). To learn more check out my [getting started page](#) and my [5-Week Meditation Course](#).

**Prayer.** Present in all theistic paths, prayer is an exercise of directing our mind to the Divine, with devotion and surrender. It may be scripted or spontaneous; spoken out loud, silently in the mind, or without words (pure communion).

**Breath & Energy Work.** These are specific ways of breathing and moving our attention through the body. They are often accompanied by visualization or repetition of sacred sounds (*mantras*). It can be done for the purpose of healing, energizing, purifying, calming, contemplating, etc. Examples are the *pranayama* from Yoga and

the *qigong* from Daoism. It is also advised as a preparation exercise for meditation, which is more subtle and internal.

**Somatic Techniques.** In conjunction to breath-work, some traditions use body postures and movements for developing health, freeing energy flow, and other purposes. Here we have the *asanas* of Yoga, Buddhist *mudras*, and several exercises from the Daoist tradition and Tantric schools.

**Qualities of Mind/Heart.** All traditions speak of the development of certain qualities of mind and heart. Common virtues that are valued are: tranquility, equanimity, humility, detachment, loving-kindness, compassion, trust, devotion, discipline, courage, mindfulness, concentration, truthfulness, morality, discernment, and energy. These are developed through reflection, study, specific meditation and breathing techniques, and mainly by being mindful of them in our moment-after-moment choices ([these tools](#) can help!).

**Chanting.** Chanting is used in some paths as a means of prayer, study, and focusing of the mind in preparation for meditation. In devotional paths it is used for developing feelings of surrender and devotion; in other traditions, key texts are sometimes chanted instead of being read, as a help for memorization and contemplation.

**Asceticism.** Periods of intense self-discipline, simplicity, and no self-indulgence. These include fasting, intensive retreats, vows of silence, abstinence, long hours of meditation, etc. It's like a "mind detox" or "spiritual cleansing", and it's a great way to burn negative patterns and quickly advance in the practice. It develops will power, self-control, and a sense of peace and contentment that depends on nothing else. In Yoga traditions they call this *tapas*.

## LEARNING & ABSORBING

**Study & Contemplation.** Listening to talks or reading spiritual texts of a tradition, and thinking deeply about the meaning and implications of those teachings. This can be both the foundational texts and commentary literature. We find this in basically all traditions. In Christianity it is called *lectio divina*; in Raja Yoga they call it *swadhyaya*. Some seek to actually memorize the whole texts.

The purpose of study is gaining understanding, insight, and wisdom. The contemplation aspect is to think how those teachings apply to my life, what it means to me, and how knowing these will change the way I see the world and act. The teachings are often to be seen as a *model to understand reality*, and not necessarily as precise descriptions of

reality. They are a framework of how to relate to things, and how to practice the path – and as such is either useful or not-useful.

**Community & Teacher Relationship.** The relationship with the teacher, and spending time in a community of practitioners, is a valuable way to not only learn the tradition, but absorb the gist of it. A community offers: support in overcoming difficulties on the way; motivation; insight on the finer aspects of practice; answers; and like-minded people with whom to relate.

In some traditions the texts are considered of secondary importance, while a personal relationship with the teacher or guru is seen as essential for the growth of the student/disciple. Some of them emphasise a “heart to heart” transmission that happens through initiation, and spending time with the teacher (*satsang*).

**Belief.** In some spiritual traditions, having faith on certain basic tenets is the entry door to the practice. Other paths, like Buddhism and Yoga, are more experiential by nature, and tend to require little or no belief. In any case, it is natural that as you start deepening in a path, and experiencing real progress, you gain more confidence in the wisdom behind the teachings – even the ones you don’t understand yet.

## EXTERNAL ACTION

**Ethics.** Following a set of principles or specific rules of behavior. In Buddhism, for instance, the five basic precepts are: (1) do not cause harm; (2) do not say what is untrue; (3) do not take what is not given; (4) do not engage in sexual misbehavior; (5) do not use intoxicants. Most traditions have similar instructions. They are deeper than what they appear on the surface, and they exist so that our actions in body, speech and mind support and reflect the truth we are seeking.

**Ritual.** Some traditions are more ritualistic, but basically all of them involve some type of ritual. A ritual is basically any set of actions that are done in the same way, for a specific purpose. Usually a feeling of reverence, seriousness, or intensity is associated with them. The ultimate purpose of rituals is to develop certain feelings or states of mind – and not to put up a show.

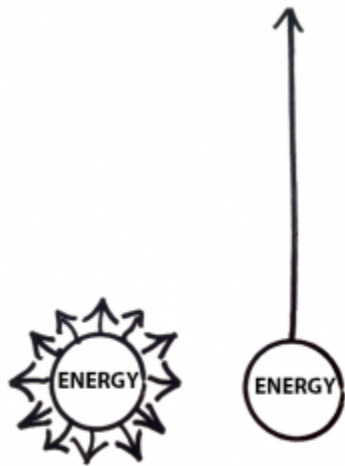
**Service.** Serving the community – be it other spiritual practitioners, or society at large – can be an expression of one’s spiritual commitment. Feeding the poor, social reform, translation of scriptures, supporting online communities, etc. What makes it “spiritual” is not so much the type of work done, but the attitude, heart, and intention behind it.

You don’t need to do all these trainings. Each path emphasizes certain practices, and gives them a unique flavor. If you don’t know where to start, I would suggest having

one core cultivation practice (meditation or prayer), together with the three foundations of “developing qualities”, “ethics” and “study”.

Do you know of any practice that is not adequately present in this spiritual disciplines list? Let me know below, in the comments section.

## Spiritual Paths



A question that is often raised is: “Should I follow one specific tradition, or learn from many?” In my experience, you need a bit of both. Learn about as many traditions as you feel attracted to, and eventually choose one as your main approach, and focus on that. Review your choice from time to time as you mature in the journey.

This is better than following one tradition without knowing much about any other, because you might not be following the one that is most efficacious for you. Or, even if you are, knowing the practices and concepts of other traditions can help you gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for your

own. And perhaps even cover some of the shortcomings that particular tradition has for you.

The other extreme – of reading and trying everything, but not committing to any specific practice – is also not so helpful. It is like moving one mile in ten directions, rather than ten miles in one direction. This attitude may indicate internal resistances that you are not aware of.

Although there are countless paths, teachings, traditions, lineages, schools and masters, ultimately we can say there are **5 types of paths**. Here is a brief introduction.

**Path of KNOWLEDGE.** The core practices are study, contemplation, and meditation. Liberation happens through **wisdom and insight**, by clearly seeing who we are, and understanding reality as it is. Some traditions that fall into this approach are: Jnana Yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism, Kabbalah, Samkhya.

**Path of DEVOTION.** The core practices are prayer, chanting, mantras, belief, ritual, and teacher relationship. Liberation happens by **surrender** of our ego into the higher Power Source/God/Consciousness. Examples are: Bhakti Yoga, Christianity, and Sufism.



**Path of MEDITATION.** The core practices are meditation, breath work, asceticism, and teacher relationship. Liberation happens by **stillness** and meditative absorption, which burns through the impurities of the mind and heart. Examples are: Raja Yoga, Nada Yoga, Buddhism, Samaya Tantra, Jainism, Kashmir Shaivism.

**Path of SERVICE.** The core practices are prayer, community, ethics and service. Liberation happens by **active selflessness**, the burning away of impurities that happen by the constant service without wanting anything back, not even recognition. This path is often coupled with that of devotion. Example are: Karma Yoga, Christianity, and the approach of some Buddhist lineages.

**Path of ENERGY.** The core practices are meditation, breath work, somatic techniques, asceticism, teacher relationship, ritual. Liberation happens by **sublimation and purification** of our body, mind, and psyche. There is a great variety of paths here; some of them are more ritualistic; some emphasize the development of psychic powers or communication with invisible beings; others are strongly focused on physical health and longevity. Examples of traditions are: Tantra Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Kriya Yoga, Laya Yoga, Vajrayana Buddhism, Daoism, Shamanism.

The practices of developing internal qualities, and ethics, are universal to all paths.

There are lots of overlaps, but we can say that Knowledge, Surrender, Meditation, Service and Energy are the core elements of all spiritual practice. These are the main ways for achieving self-transcendence. Your own path can contain elements of more than one of these; or may also change from one to another, as you grow in your journey.

## Next Steps

For the first time we have the wisdom teachings of all these traditions easily accessible, which is a boon. Hopefully this post has helped you make some sense of this universe of spirituality.

By now you probably have a better idea of

- What drives you to seek spirituality
- What is your ultimate goal
- What types of spiritual practice most speak to you
- Which of the five main paths is the general approach you want to take

For further reading, I highly recommend Timothy Conway's excellent [12 Spiritual Temperaments](#) article, and my recommended [spiritual books list](#).

The next step is to learn more about the path and practices you wish to explore, through books, websites, and local centers (if you can find).

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